

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONFESSION

MILTON W. HOROWITZ

The author is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Queens College, Flushing, New York. During the war he was a Research Assistant in Psychology with the National Research Council. He taught at the University of Kansas from 1947 through 1950. His main interests are in Social Psychology (more specifically in social perception and interpersonal relations), personality theory, and methodology in science. He has published research in visual perception, motivation, and interpersonal relations.—EDITOR.

The problem of confession is probably as ancient as history itself. Nevertheless, there is little relevant literature either as to its frequency of occurrence or as to its dynamics. This paper will examine various facets of the psychological situation of the person who confesses to an act. We shall deal only with the situation of those who confess voluntarily to acts of which they have been accused. We shall not deal with the psychology of those who confess to acts which they did not commit since this constitutes a different, albeit an interesting, problem. In addition, we shall not deal with those who confess to acts through what appears to be a desire for prestige, status, recognition, or notoriety. For example, criminals frequently return to the scene of their crimes apparently from some perverse ego involvement in the technique of the crime, or in the crime itself. Sometimes it appears that there is a deliberate intent to capitalize in some way on the cleverness or ingenuity of the criminal act, although this intent may be unconscious. Finally, we are not dealing here with confessions to "trivial acts." Here the person is under no pressure and feels no guilt. "Yes, I did it." "Blame me—now let's get on with the task." These are more or less common expressions sometimes accompanied by irritation.

Why should confession occur? Why not always brazen it out when confronted by accusation? Why does a person convict himself through a confession, when, at the very worst, no confession would leave him at least as well off (and possibly better off) from the point of view of the physical and social consequences of his act? One clue, of course, comes from religious practice, for "confession is good for the soul." Apparently, cathartic and purgative psychological properties accrue from confession.

But the confession in religious practice is frequently, if not usually, of a minor nature and possibly, too, of a mechanical or formalized nature and most frequently, therefore, is not coordinate with the problem we shall discuss here. We intend to speak to the point of confession of acts or deeds which, in being confessed, constitute a danger to the well-being of the person. Such dangers, of course, must be defined psychologically, for we mean to include such acts as the confession of a child to a household misdemeanor as well as the confession of an adult to a crime against society, or the confession of a spy to the fact of his spying.

Our main problem, then, is why confession should occur at all. Secondly, we shall explore the social psychological conditions under which it occurs. An analysis of the cognitive, perceptual, and motivational changes that occur in the psychological

situation of the act of confession will give us an understanding of this behavior. Coordinate, of course, is the problem of non-confession and we shall explore, also, the conditions which must be present (or absent) when the person remains adamant.

Let us begin with an anecdote by way of illustration. Some time ago a great deal of cheating occurred at an Academy (which shall remain nameless) as it did at many other institutions. The cheating, for the most part, was only suspected, for few culprits at that time had been caught. But the Department of Psychology, like others within the Academy, was alerted. It adopted a watchful procedure. Final examinations in several courses were of the objective type at which cheating is almost impossible to catch red-handed. However, in correcting the examination papers, a comparison of the pattern of wrong answers led to the conclusion that three pairs of students in a given class had been in collusion in some respect.¹

The procedure adopted in these three cases was simple. The six students were called in next day and asked to retake the examination on the ground that "some answers were not clear." Upon comparing the first with the second answer sheets (i.e., with the sheets turned in after the repeated examination), it was clear that one student of each of the three pairs had accomplished almost precisely what he had done originally, whereas the other three students obtained a grade that was substantially lower. Here was very strong evidence that there had been collusion in the first examination. However, no accusations of an explicit nature were made. There were no stern or frowning faces. All involved persons were simply and directly confronted with the evidence, namely, the coincidence of answers on adjacent papers, and asked if there was some explanation of the coincidence. The question was asked simply, calmly and directly.

When so confronted the involved persons confessed, much to the surprise of all. Clearly, cheating could not be proved in any accepted legal sense in these cases. Guilt was presumptive, only. Nevertheless, all did confess without being pressed. But that pressure existed is nearly certain because of the nature of the situation. But it was intrinsic in the psychology of the situation, and not induced.

There are several important facts to be extracted from this anecdote. First, a confession of guilt was obtained and it might be termed an "operant," in some sense; that is, it was not elicited but was made spontaneously by the guilty parties. There was no grilling, no brutality, no unusual direct psychological pressure. Secondly, the "suspects" were confronted with what must have been, at least in retrospect, overwhelmingly damning evidence. Third, the "suspects" were confronted alone in a social psychological situation that must have created great indirect pressure upon a truly guilty person.

There is no reason to suspect that these students were not ordinary, or un-representative of other students. Indeed there is no reason to suspect that they were not representative of human beings generally when confronted by similar social psychological situations. Actually, statistics of the police, of the Federal Bureau of Investi-

¹ It is impossible to discover cheating on a multiple choice objective examination by "right answers." It is, however, statistically possible to determine that the same "wrong answers" for adjacent papers compared to "wrong answers" for non-adjacent papers, form a pattern which could not reasonably occur by chance.

gation, of espionage cases that have been published, and even petty cases of a similar nature to that recounted above, show a high incidence of confession.

Let us be perfectly clear on this point, however. There is no question that confession to a crime can be obtained (even when not committed) by duress. Although there is apparently no evidence that drugs exist that can force a man to confess if he does not wish to, torture, brutality, or excessive or prolonged pressures can produce confession. A colleague has related to me the tale of the grade school teacher who produced confession from a spit-baller by threatening to keep the whole class after school. The contention here, however, is that such pressures need not be applied to produce a confession if the culprit is, indeed, guilty, and if certain other psychological conditions obtain. It is the purpose of this paper to elaborate these conditions.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF CONFESSION

Accusation. The first condition which it is profitable to discuss is the accusation itself. This, of course, may be stated or implied, or neither stated nor implied. The important thing is that the person feels or perceives, or infers rightly or wrongly, that he has been accused.

Clearly, if we are to understand the person's behavior and feelings, we must understand how he sees the world (his psychological reality) rather than understand what actually may exist in the world (objective reality). It is true that psychological reality often coincides in its essential aspects with objective reality, but that is irrelevant to our principle. For example, the accusation may be verbalized and formal as is customary in legal procedure in dealing with unlawful acts; or the accusation may be implied by nothing more than a raised eyebrow; or, no accusation may be intended or implied. Nevertheless, there is probably *no essential difference* in the psychological situation of the culprit whether he is explicitly accused or whether he simply believes that you think he is guilty (and the belief may be close to reality, or far from it).

In short, the person may infer, from your manner or demeanor, that he has been accused, or he may simply project his inference to you out of his own feelings of guilt. In any case, there are two conditions that may result from the perception of accusation. These are:

- 1) The person's space of free movement is limited or curtailed.²
 - 2) The person is on the defensive for psychologically he is on unsure ground.
- These two conditions, in turn, are contingent upon a third, namely:
- 3) The person is confronted either with authority or with the representation of authority.

The first two of these conditions result invariably from the perception that an accusation has been made if the third condition obtains. The third need not occur, but is a necessary sub-condition for obtaining a confession. Let us examine each in turn.

² Space of free movement is defined psychologically. As a first approximation it may be defined as psychological freedom. It is the extent to which the person feels able to do things that he wants to do or that he feels that he may want to do. Needless to say, the person's subjective feelings need not correspond to physical or social reality. See KURT LEWIN, *PRINCIPLES OF TOPOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), pp. 42 ff. for an extended discussion of this concept.

* Imputing wrongdoing
to person by an
authority with the
power of sanction!

1) Given the confrontation with authority or its representation, curtailment of psychological freedom is inherent in the situation of accusation. It need not be explicitly given (although it frequently is) by an expressed prohibition or incarceration. The social psychological situation itself contains intrinsic barriers to locomotion.³ The person cannot behave as he formerly did. He perceives that avenues of free psychological movement are limited. He may even perceive that previously available channels of communication are now either barred or have changed. The psychological environment of the accused in this situation is a constricted one. Conversely, if the person perceives that the accusation is not backed by authority, it may be disregarded behaviorally, or not even perceived as an accusation. The child who is threatened with physical hurt by a teacher and knows that such punishment is not permitted by law is in a strong psychological position and the teacher is in a vulnerable one.

2) The accused must now defend himself for he is placed in an inconstant psychological situation. When the person perceives that he is accused he is placed in a situation in which the perceptual structure is unstable. This is so because he does not know exactly how much is actually known to the accuser. Perhaps the accuser is bluffing, in which case one might brazen it out. Perhaps the accuser knows all, in which case one is better off to ask for sympathetic treatment or to argue for extenuating circumstances. Most usually the truth lies between these extremes but the accused doesn't know exactly where.

Precisely because of the unstable characteristics of the perceptual field the accused person is on unsure ground.⁴ He will tend to be relatively more suggestible and his behavior will change as stimulating conditions seem to change. Cues for behavior which have previously been utilized with surety and conviction have shifted and the person is thrown back upon his available ego defensive responses "to find his way around." Essentially this means that the person has no formula for proper behavior, no role if you will, that he can utilize in this situation. He must behave, then, in stereotyped and compulsive ways. He feels that he has been personally attacked, hemmed in, constricted. The perception of accusation to the guilty person must inevitably produce defense for an attacked ego. Indeed, even innocent persons frequently *feel* guilty when falsely accused.

3) It is not inevitable that the person will perceive his accusers as representing authority. It is, however, likely. And it is, also, an essential condition for producing confession. For without the perception of authority the person perceives little or no curtailment of his space of free movement and also perceives that his ego has not been

³ Locomotion is also defined psychologically and is extremely important. It includes actual bodily movement, but also a lot more, for clearly a person "moves psychologically" when he gets a promotion, say, or receives a diploma. Conversely, and as examples, barriers to locomotion exist when a person is locked in a room (restriction of quasi-physical locomotion), when a person cannot solve a problem (restriction of quasi-intellectual locomotion), when a person doesn't feel free to talk (restriction of quasi-social locomotion), etc.

⁴ A similar psychological situation exists, for example, for the person who is applying for a new job. How should he behave? Should he be serious? Carefree? Should he show that he needs the job desperately? Or should he indicate that he is not too involved? Behavior changes as the person gets different cues from the stimulus situation. Frequently, the person in such a psychological situation is led to exaggerated behavior quite unlike "his usual self."

seriously attacked. Crucial here is the person's perception of the ratio of the potentially hostile (authoritative) power to his own power. Should all sources of external hostile power be perceived as weaker than his own forces then conditions 1 and 2 above will not obtain.

Conversely, should the accused perceive that he is confronted with authority he is placed, with respect to space of free movement and defensiveness, in a psychologically untenable position. In a sense, the person perceives that he is "cornered." The goal of freedom has now been induced, but the paths to that goal have been curtailed. Indeed, the authority itself acquires the character of a barrier to the person's locomotion to freedom. It is clear that the accusation must stem from authority, for the restriction of the situation loses its intrinsic qualities—its psychological existence—if the accuser is divested of power. It need not be assumed that the strength and extent of the restrictive character of the situation is directly related to the perceived sphere of power and influence of the authority proportionate to the accused person's own power and influence. Clearly, the strength of such a social field is a function of the person rather than a function of the objective strength of the authority itself.

Evidence. Another condition which is probably necessary, but not sufficient, for the production of confession, is the person's perception that he is "caught with the goods." Once again, we are speaking from the point of view of the person's life space, or psychological awareness. It is not necessary that the objective evidence be presented, but necessary only that the accused believes that it is available. (We are here disregarding those persons who desire to confess or be caught.) Hence, it is a necessary condition for confession that the person believes that others (the accusers) know intimately and overwhelmingly of his culpability. It is clear that this condition exacerbates the three factors listed above. The person's space of free movement is now further limited. A great part of the total environmental possibilities for action and behavior are removed from his control. Great psychological difficulties arise because his own abilities have decreased and external demands have increased. His psychological maneuverability is further reduced.

Similarly, the perception that evidence is available means that more powerful forces are in existence than was true of the simple accusation. It is true that accusation implies some evidence is available in and of itself. However, it may imply no more than suspicion based on the attribution of motive (under proper conditions specific people are seen to have motives that are congruent with the act);⁵ or it may imply a shrewd guess based on the psychology of causality (just as certain movements or actions can define a motive, certain behaviors or attitudes can suggest a causal relationship—a person "looks like" he is the guilty one); or it may imply no more than unit formation, without any objective evidence, based merely on propinquity, similarity, or common fate. (For example, things which are close to each other, like each other,

⁵ See MILTON W. HOROWITZ AND NICHOLAS PASTORE, *Relationship of Motive to Author and Statement*, SCIENCE, 1955, 121, 110-111, and NICHOLAS PASTORE AND MILTON W. HOROWITZ, *The Influence of Attributed Motive on the Acceptance of Statement*, JOUR. OF ABN. AND SOC. PSYCHOL., 1955, 50, pp. 331-332, for a discussion of how an attributed motive can change the perception of a person and his act.

or which share a joint destiny, among other factors, predispose themselves to be seen as units, or belonging together. This means that the simple fact of being near the scene of a crime, or of looking like "we believe criminals look," can bring suspicion upon oneself.)⁶

If, however, the person perceives that the accusation is backed by "real" evidence, the ratio of external forces to own forces is increased and the person's psychological position is now more precarious. It is interesting to note that in such situations the accused tends toward over response, or exaggerated response; to hostility and emotional display; to self-righteousness, to counter accusation, to defense; to "grasping at straws," i.e., tends to utilize each new cue for behavior as it avails itself to him. These behaviors are, of course, precisely what we should predict from knowledge of such a social psychological situation. For the reduction of the space of free movement (and the induction of barriers in the life space) leads to frustration and concomitant behaviors. The perception that one is attacked leads to counter attack and defense. And the fact of a psychologically and perceptually unstable situation leads to varied response, to conflict, to approach and withdrawal, to "grasping at straws" and a heightened awareness of small cues that may lead to psychological salvation.

Perhaps as important as the above in determining some of the person's behavior is that he is placed in the psychologically coercive and insecure position of estimating how much is really known. Here the person must defend himself against imagined knowledge as well as perceived knowledge. Dynamically this means that the accused does not know the definiteness of the barriers for they are not clear. The solidity and clarity of the barriers is a function of how much he believes is known, but here the life space (psychological situation) as a whole is unstable and shifting. This leads to greater suggestibility and seduces the accused to read into what may be innocent things in reality, portents which need not be there. It should be clear that the person perceives that he is pushed by forces induced by the limitation of his space of free movement (and the erection of barriers) into locomotion away from freedom. But it is equally clear that he is in a psychological region of high negative valence and the same forces insure that he must take steps that will reduce the negativity or lead him out of the region.

Friendly forces. We have discussed the factor of accusation and have raised the point that the accuser must be perceived as an arm of authority with power. Additionally, it has been noted that the person must perceive (very likely as a necessary condition to confession), that the total hostile array of power exceeds the total array of friendly power that he can martial. More explicitly, we now make the reduction of the accused's "friendly forces" a necessary condition also. For the person to perceive confession as a path to freedom he must be aware of his vulnerability and weakness. In short, the person must believe that he is alone, or nearly alone. He is cut off from succor. His situation is such that salvation lies only in him.

It should be noted that this is frequently the case of spies. For various reasons governments are loath to admit to espionage attempts, and spies who are caught are literally as well as psychologically alone for their sole source of friendly forces is com-

⁶ See FRITZ HEIDER, *Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality*, PSYCHOL. REV. 1944, 51, 358-374, and, *Attitudes and Cognitive Organization*, JOUR. OF PSYCHOL., 1946, 21, 107-112.

1956]

pletely cut off in their government's denial of implication in their espionage. Lewin has indicated that a child is more likely to discuss personal matters openly when he is naked. He notes that James "emphasized the close relation between clothing and the psychological person as a social being," and concludes that "under certain circumstances nakedness diminishes the firmness of the psychological wall between child and environment."⁷ If we may use the analogy, as the person perceives friendly power has diminished, as he is cut off from all succor, it has the effect of increasing his psychological nakedness. This has important consequences, for as the psychological wall between the person and the environment diminishes he is able to perceive parts of the environment (the accuser) as a path rather than a barrier.

Guilt. Another condition, which is most probably necessary, though not sufficient for confession, is that the accused person feels guilt. It is not certain that this will obtain although it is highly probable in the case of those who are, indeed, guilty. Even innocent persons placed under a cloud of accusation, feel apprehension or anxiety and, sometimes, guilt, through the operation of unconscious factors. It is not clear precisely how guilt operates to produce confession, but one possibility is that it tends toward self-hostility. That is, the person believes he has caused an act. This act is negative which accounts for the guilt. This results in hostility toward himself or to some part of himself. In religious confession it is a subsystem that remains negative and is effectively (psychologically) separated from the person, himself. For example, one may rationalize that the flesh is weak but the spirit is strong and healthy. That is, I, the person am essentially good but there are some peripheral parts which don't really belong to me that are bad.

Where central ego variables are touched, however, the person can no longer separate himself from his ego. He feels guilty for a bad act and since bad persons commit bad acts, he must necessarily feel some self-hostility. It is moot how much the self-hostility acts as a force in the person to confess, but it is clear that confession can purge the guilt. For to confess at least partially makes amends and makes the person less negative (and perhaps even makes him positive) to himself.

It should be equally clear that if the person does not feel guilt he is not in his own mind guilty and will not confess to an act which others may regard as evil or wrong and he, in fact, considers correct. Confession in such a case can come only with duress even where all other conditions previously mentioned may prevail.

The path to freedom. We have examined the essential structural and dynamic factors that exist in the person's psychological situation. We have seen that the fact that the person is (and feels) guilty, and has been accused, and perceives that there is good evidence of his guilt, and that his accusation stems from an authority with a high ratio of power compared to the forces that he can martial, places him in a behavioral region that has limited psychological possibilities for locomotion, a great many restraints, and is at the same time a region of high negative valence for him.

It is important here to understand the person's psychological position to understand now why the path to freedom lies in confession. Lewin and his students who have studied the phenomenon of social pressure have shown that a behavior which is distasteful to the person may, under certain dynamic conditions, be readily accepted.

⁷ See KURT LEWIN, *DYNAMIC THEORY OF PERSONALITY* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935), p. 108.

Indeed, it may be seen by the person as a salvation, or at least, as a relief. It is only necessary here that the accused be pushed by strong forces far enough along a psychological path that it becomes easier to keep going than to turn back. At this point confession will be accepted as a way out without resistance, for the conflict has been resolved by the strengthening of forces toward freedom and the concomitant weakening of forces toward remaining adamant.

Confession to the guilty person under the conditions previously described may be perceived in two ways. It may be seen as a region, an activity or an act, that is intrinsically negative. It may also, however, be perceived as a means, i.e., a path, a region through which the person may go to get to the region of freedom.⁸ As such it becomes a region of derived positive valence and as pressure increases, i.e., as the person perceives his space of free movement decrease and the ratio of hostile forces to own forces increase, he also perceives that the path of "retreat to freedom" through remaining adamant and establishing his innocence is composed of a series of regions that far outweigh in negative valence any yet remaining negative valence that confession may have.

Horney⁹ has pointed out that the situation of the neurotic, as perceived by him, is one of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world. Clearly, this is also the psychological position of the accused. However, the accused does have a way out, namely, confession. *This is the path to freedom* for it immediately clarifies his psychological position, removes him from a highly negative situation, frees him from pressure, and to a great extent, removes his guilt.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is believed that the main psychological conditions under which confession will occur have been outlined here. These conditions, none of which is deemed sufficient and all of which are deemed necessary, and all of which are in the person's cognitive field, are: 1) The person is accused by authority or its representation. 2) Evidence is presented (or is believed available). 3) Forces friendly to the accused are reduced. 4) The person feels guilt. 5) The person perceives that confession is the path to psychological freedom.

⁸ At this point it is possible that the perception of confession as the "path to freedom" is more easily induced by creating a friendly and permissive atmosphere for the culprit.

⁹ See KAREN HORNEY, *The Neurotic Personality* (New York: Norton 1937).